

CHAPTER ONE

University

Toronto – September 1968

A SMILE TUGGED AT THE CORNERS OF ELLEN MANERY'S MOUTH. CHAIRS scraped and footsteps and soft conversation faded behind her. She packed her books into her carry bag, relieved that everything had gone right on her first day at the University of Toronto. Her bus got her to campus on time. She found her classes. So far the instructors seemed OK. And she got the seat in the back corner in every class. Her smile broadened. Day One down; only a few thousand more until I'm a doctor, she thought.

Someone cleared their throat behind her and her smile froze. Three pairs of shoes appeared in a line beside her desk. It's them, she thought. They were in every class. They sat in the first row, right in front of the lecturer. Ellen looked up slowly at the three other girls in her classes.

"We're going to the cafeteria for coffee," the ponytailed blonde said. "Maybe... you'd like to come, too?"

Ellen's face grew hot. A flush crept up her cheeks.

"If you have time," the dark-haired one said with a slight French accent. They smiled at her.

Ellen found herself smiling back. She nodded, lifted her carry bag and left the room with them. "We got to know each other last year," the blonde said as they walked. "I'm Chrissie."

"I'm Monique," the French-sounding one said.

"Diane," the third girl, a brunette with a pixie cut, said. "Now there's four women in our classes."

Ellen gripped her carry bag with white knuckles, her eyes darting from one girl to another. Monique, Chrissie and Diane. She took a deep breath. "I'm Ellen. It's my first day."



They were... friendly, Ellen thought on the bus ride home. Although they seemed to be close friends, they certainly didn't look alike. Chrissie could have been a magazine model in her modern sleeveless peacock-coloured minidress while Diane's short-sleeved, full-skirted cotton dress looked homemade. In her wild flowery baggy shirt, capri pants and sandals, Monique would pass for a hippie. They were an unlikely group. She looked down at her plain-coloured skirt and blouse. *I wonder how I looked to them. But maybe how we dress won't matter so much—doing top work is what should be important at university.* She pictured them sitting together having coffee. *All we did was talk about the courses and the instructors, and they included me. How extraordinary!*

All through school Ellen had been academically successful, the top of her class; she failed miserably at making friends. She grimaced remembering the taunts: "Euwh! Watch out. Ellen's got germs."

Be careful, the voice in her head warned. She took a deep breath and replaced the bad memories with her friend Tony's face. She'd made a friend before. And maybe now, she'd make three more.



The next morning, her heart began to pound as she slipped into her first class. But in the front row, Diane saw her and waved. Then they all looked back and waved. Ellen waved back, but she quickly slid into the back corner desk, eyes down, surprise and excitement fighting with cautiousness and shyness. When she finally looked again, the girls were facing the instructor. For the rest of the hour Ellen focused on her notebook, only looking up when absolutely necessary. When the word 'friends' pushed past her determined concentration she shoved it down. *Wait and see,* she thought. *It looks good but...*

They were waiting at the door at the end of the lecture as though it

was normal. They all made their way together to the next class. Ellen felt a wash of amazement. She imagined Tony's face. *Can making friends be this easy?*



"There's no way you can keep sitting back there, you know," Monique said as they headed to class. "We need to stick together...up front where no one can ignore us or pretend we don't exist."

"Right," said Chrissie. "Strength in numbers."

"United we stand," said Diane, looping her arm through Ellen's and guiding her down the corridor. "Right?"

Ellen's stomach dropped. She was startled to hear herself reply, "Right."



"I always wanted to be a doctor," Ellen said. "For as long as I can remember."

"It took me longer to figure it out," Monique said. "At first I stuck with the usual nurse-teacher-secretary route. I escaped northern Quebec at eighteen and went to St. Mary's Hospital nursing school."

"Mom said it was like that, too, when she was growing up. You chose nurse; she was a secretary," Ellen said. "Once she knew I wanted to be a doctor, she'd never have let me settle for anything less. How did you end up here?"

Monique wrinkled her nose. "Nursing just substituted one dreary place for another. Imagine sixty teenage girls locked up together, guarded by dour, dried-up nuns. The only good part was working in the hospital. I don't think anyone where I came from would ever have considered med school, but I soon figured out that I wanted to be one of the doctors who breezed in and gave orders, not the nurse wiping up vomit and handing out bedpans. But my family thought I was weird. It took a long time to save enough money—but here I am at twenty-eight working hard to become a doctor."

"I always wanted to be a doctor, too," Chrissie said, "except I'm a legacy. My dad got his MD here. When I was small I'd put his stethoscope

around my neck and give my dolls a check-up. I loved it when my brothers got hurt and I could bandage them. I wasn't exactly a tomboy, but my favourite books were the Nancy Drew mysteries. I wanted to be independent like she was and not let anything, or anyone, get the better of me. I still do!

"And... what else? Oh," she said, "I'm twenty." With both hands she gestured to Diane.

"Me? I'm totally uninteresting." When Chrissie laughed, she added, "OK. I'm twenty-two and I come from a big Catholic family, four boys and three girls. Catholic school, complete with nuns," she added, nodding at Monique. "Indoctrinated by religious stories of martyrs and saints. I used to go to the chapel at recess and lunch to pray the rosary and do the Stations of the Cross. For a while after I watched Audrey Hepburn in *The Nun's Story* I was determined to be a nursing nun in some incredibly poor country. Not being able to give candy up for Lent should have been a clue, but sharing a single bathroom with six siblings confirmed I'd never succeed.

"But seriously," Diane continued, "my youngest sister has Down syndrome. She needed heart surgery for her ventricular septal defect when she was three. I got to know more about hospitals than I wanted to. I admired her doctors so much that I decided that's what I'd be. I didn't realize how few women doctors there are or how difficult it is for women to even get into medical school. I know for every woman admitted there are nine or ten men, but I'm not going to be passed over."

"Right," Monique said, "Ellen, you brought our number up to four, so maybe things are starting to change. But for now we sit at the front together and refuse to let them ignore or dismiss us."

"You only said you always wanted to be a doctor, Ellen. What about before U of T?" Chrissie said.

Ellen took a deep breath. "A little over a year ago my parents bought a summer resort in Salmon Arm, a little town in the middle of British Columbia. I'd been in a special program before we moved. So last year I finished my last grade twelve class and grade thirteen and qualified for U of T pre-med. I'm here in Toronto living with my aunt."

“Special program? That sounds like an *accelerated* one. How old are you?” Diane said.

Ellen’s cheeks suddenly flamed red. “I’ll be seventeen next month.”

“Which means you’re sixteen,” Chrissie said. “Sixteen!”

Monique got up and called over her shoulder as she walked away, “Guys in pre-med are ruthless. They eat young ’uns for breakfast and spit out the bones.”

She’s leaving. It’s happening again. Ellen tightened her face so the disappointment wouldn’t show. *Everybody who meets me runs away. I can’t help how old I am!* she shouted silently as tears built up behind her lids. She pushed her chair back, and groped for her carry bag. Something cold and wet hit her face. Blinking rapidly, she saw Monique dip her fingers in a glass and flick water on her face. “Baby Ellen, with this water I adopt you into the Society of Future Female Doctors.” With a whoop, the other two joined in spraying water over her.

Her fingers lightly touched her cheeks, mixing the cold water with salty tears.

“You need a nickname. You’re so tall I get a nose bleed looking up at you. I think we’ll call you *Little Sister*,” said Diane as she handed Ellen a wad of tissues.



By the end of the week, seated at the front of the class, Ellen thought of them as the group of four. It was as though she had known them all her life.

CHAPTER TWO

Letters

September 1968

*Dear Tony,**Sept. 21/68*

It's hard to believe two weeks are finished already. I've got my schedule, of course. Monday to Friday — classes and studying. Aunt Madge said I need to ease up on the weekends if I want to stay sane, so... Friday is TV movie night, Saturday, letter writing. I'll try to send a note every week.

This is a lot more challenging than high school. There'll be lots of competition from the guys. I'm not sure if it's like that in every faculty, but pre-med is. Everyone's determined to be the top of the class.

The most amazing thing! Three girls in my classes 'adopted' me. We're study buddies, sit together in class, go for coffee and, well, they're friends. They call me 'Little Sister'. (Joke) We sit in the front row, right in front of the instructors. I worried I might block the board for people behind me but Monique said, "Screw them. They can move if they don't like it." She's outspoken. Chrissie and Diane are the other two. I'll tell you about them in the next letter.

What's BCIT like? Is your boarding place nice? Have you figured out the bus system? Does it take long to get to BCIT? How are your classes? How does it feel dressing up in white shirts and ties every day?

I'm really looking forward to reading how things are going for you in Vancouver. Write soon.

Your friend, Ellen



Dear Mom and Dad,

Sept. 21/68

Aunt Madge is writing, too, so we can share a stamp. I won't tell you all about living here because I'm sure she will. We watched a movie on TV last night and had tea and popcorn. I think it'll be our Friday ritual.

My classes seem OK. Everyone's very serious... not just me. Although there are three other girls in my classes, the majority are boys. The professors address everything to them. They're not used to girls in pre-med. There's going to be lots of reading and quizzes. The weight of the texts alone will build up my muscles. Just imagine I'm back in school in Salmon Arm and you'll have a pretty accurate picture.

Time to study.

Love, Ellen



As the letters dropped into the mailbox, she wondered if she should have told her parents more about The Girls. After all those years giving her advice, her mother would be relieved she'd finally made some friends. Ellen sighed, not knowing how she would tell her mother if things went wrong later. *I can add bits about them once in a while*, she decided, *and, if we keep all being friends, I'll fill in the details at Christmas*. For now, she'd enjoy having people to hang out with, people who liked the same things she did... who liked her. *I'm glad I told Tony. He'll understand*.

As she walked back to Madge's she remembered the fun she'd had with Tony—learning to dance, spearing suckerfish, hanging out. Her lips tingled when she remembered the time in the woods just before she left.

She hoped he was enjoying living in the city and going to technical school. She could hardly wait for his letters to start coming.